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KGB defector talks about former job in 'ethnic espionage'

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The life of a Soviet KGB agent isn't always one cloak-and-dagger operation after another.

At least not the life of Imants Lesinskis.

Mr. Lesinskis spent 23 years working in various positions for the Soviet Committee for State Security (KGB) prior to his 1978 defection to the United States.

Though he was not a KGB version of James Bond, Lesinskis was nonetheless effective at what he did. Intelligence experts characterize his former job as "Soviet active measures." Lesinskis calls it "ethnic espionage."

He worked in his native Latvia, one of the tiny Baltic states taken over by the Soviets following World War II.

In the Latvian capital city, Riga, he served as editor of the newspaper *Dzimtenes Balss* (Voice of the Motherland) and as chairman of the Latvian Committee for Cultural Relations, a group that maintains ties with Latvians living abroad. He says both of these organizations are KGB fronts.

The man who today is chairman of the LCCR is a KGB lieutenant colonel who was expelled from Sweden for spying in 1982, Lesinskis says. According to a newspaper account dated April 22, 1982, Soviet vice-consul Alberts Liepa, a Latvian, was expelled from Sweden for trying to recruit Latvian émigrés as spies. Another press report quoted Latvian émigrés in Sweden as saying that Mr. Liepa was "well known among their community for his propaganda broadcasts to Sweden on Riga Radio in the late 1960s."

"It was a big operation on the Soviet scale," Lesinskis says.

In effect, Lesinskis directed a system for assembling and distributing disinformation to discredit (Lesinskis today uses the word "slander") Latvians and Latvian émigrés throughout the world whom Soviet authorities had determined to be anti-Soviet. Latvian nationalists were prime targets. He says it was a "Soviet propaganda offensive."

Émigré mail is intercepted by the Soviets, he says. Lists of people living abroad are made, then files are made and updated on each of them. He adds, "There are files on almost all active immigrants."

There are an estimated 35,000 Latvian immigrants in the US.

Lesinskis directed a system for distributing disinformation to discredit Latvians and Latvian émigrés whom Soviet authorities felt to be anti-Soviet.

"Many people living in the west have ties to the old country and it is relatively easy for the KGB to use that nostalgia for the old country for their own purposes," Lesinskis says.

"One of their main aims is to organize Soviet support groups that can invite KGB people of the native country into the US," he says.

"What they do is split our émigré community in half," says Aristids Lamberg, vice-chairman of the Boston-based American-Latvian Cultural Exchange Committee. "It dilutes our strength. It gets us to fight among ourselves."

"They are very effective," Mr. Lamberg adds.

He ought to know. According to Lamberg, both he and his conservative, pro-West group are exactly what Lesinskis would have been targeting a decade ago.

Today, the two men are working together to do some targeting of their own.

Through a combination of speeches and press releases, Lesinskis and Lamberg intend to expose current and future KGB efforts to infiltrate and harass the Latvian émigré community in the US.

"It is very difficult for the American government to counteract those ties because the American policy has been one of promoting human contact between émigrés and their homeland," says Lamberg.

He adds, "We have started a program of identifying these [KGB] people when they come."

"I know all the support groups, the people, the methods, and aims," Lesinskis says. "Nothing has changed in comparison with the mid-1970s when I was in charge."

Their first salvo was announcing that four of a group of seven Latvian scientists scheduled to attend a coming conference on Baltic studies in Montreal have KGB connections.

"It started an uproar in Riga to start identifying these people," Lamberg says.

Lesinskis adds that a West Coast-based Latvian group has invited a number of persons with KGB connections. He adds that he knows of a Latvian scientist who is scheduled to begin a trip to the US today. "He is a professional spy. I was with him in Austria in 1964."

Since his defection in September 1978, Lesinskis has kept a low profile, granting only occasional interviews. He says he holds a regular, well-paying job in the US and that he was treated well by the US government during his defection. He is reluctant to talk in detail about his new life in America.

"I still feel my life is in danger," he says.

"I wish I could tell some more details. I think there would be more defections," he says.

At the time of his defection, Lesinskis was working as a translator in the United Nations Secretariat.

Only a few months earlier Arkadi Shevchenko, an undersecretary-general at the UN and one of the highest-ranking Soviets in the US, shocked the UN diplomatic corps as well as his superiors in Moscow by defecting to the US. Shortly after that, Lesinskis's KGB contact in New York — UN political affairs officer Valdik Enger — was arrested and convicted with two other Soviets of having paid \$16,000 in bribes to obtain classified US documents on antisubmarine warfare.

Lesinskis says he was blackmailed into working as a KGB informer in Latvia in 1956, and though he continued to work for the KGB for more than 20 years, he was quietly opposed to its methods and goals. He says he resented what he calls the Soviet oppression of Latvia.